

Why Teach Classic Nursery Rhymes?

Research has shown that there is a very strong relationship between a child's learning classic nursery rhymes and later success in reading and spelling. Of note is that children who are familiar with a variety of nursery rhymes when they are between the ages of three and six years of age have increased literacy abilities in the three years that follow (Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley 1987). Young children's nursery rhyme knowledge is a powerful predictor of their growing skills in phonological awareness.

Teaching nursery rhymes also increases a child's ability to wait, listen closely, remember, anticipate and predict, as well as follow directions. The higher those skills, the more ready the child is to learn to read.

Learning nursery rhymes in English develops and improves extensive early literacy skills. These include Oral Language, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency, Rhythm of Words, and Comprehension. Through stimulating and fun activities offered in playful ways, the rhymes draw a child's attention to the sounds of spoken English. The teaching objectives are to help children listen on purpose for sounds in language and to pronounce new sounds and words.

The sound of a nursery rhyme has a pattern and cadence similar to that of an ongoing conversation in English. The ups and downs and pauses, experienced while saying the memorized rhyme aloud, gives children patterned and predictable practice in that area.

Although many words in nursery rhymes are no longer used in daily conversation, teachers talking with children about their meanings, the way they are spelled, and how they relate to words we use today builds student interest in other unknown words they may come upon. Teachers who routinely discuss new and unfamiliar words in their classrooms find that their students use a broader vocabulary in their day-to-day conversations and reading.

Knowing rhymes, and songs in different languages and from different countries is also quite valuable, but for reasons not specifically related to a child's ability to speak and read English. It is the learning of traditional nursery rhymes in English that is of utmost importance for any child who is learning to speak, read, and write in English.

The auditory, or listening, "channels" in young children are usually the weakest and least effective way for children to learn when they first enter school. However they must have strong auditory skills to learn to read successfully. Because of this, it is essential for teachers to combine visual and movement activities (Bryant et al. 1990), often more developed in young children, with auditory experiences in their teaching. Singing, skipping, and clapping in combination with pictures, puzzles, tiles, and props are simple ways to enhance the auditory aspect of any lesson or activity.

Increasing their listening skills will improve children's rhyming, alliteration, and phonemic awareness. It is these phonological skills that pave the way for successful reading.

Using traditional rhymes and songs over and over in preschool classrooms, embedded in physical and interactive activities, is one way to increase children's ability to predict words and phrases as well as increase vocabulary and rhyming in English. The more enjoyable, interactive, and personalized the nursery rhyme activities, the better the learning that follows.